

I USED to live on Bunker Hill. It was my first home in this incredible city. That was in 1932, a time of dreams for me, and of poverty. I had a typewriter and a stack of white paper, and I had my room in a hotel on Bunker Hill.

It cost me \$3 a week, that little room, a fabulous sum in those lean days; but I wish I might do it over again, sit in my little room with its worn green carpet, sit there in the high, old-fashioned rocker, eating an orange, my feet out the window, feasting my eyes on the city below. Such dreams for a man! A whole afternoon with the sun pouring down, a whole evening under white, chunky stars.

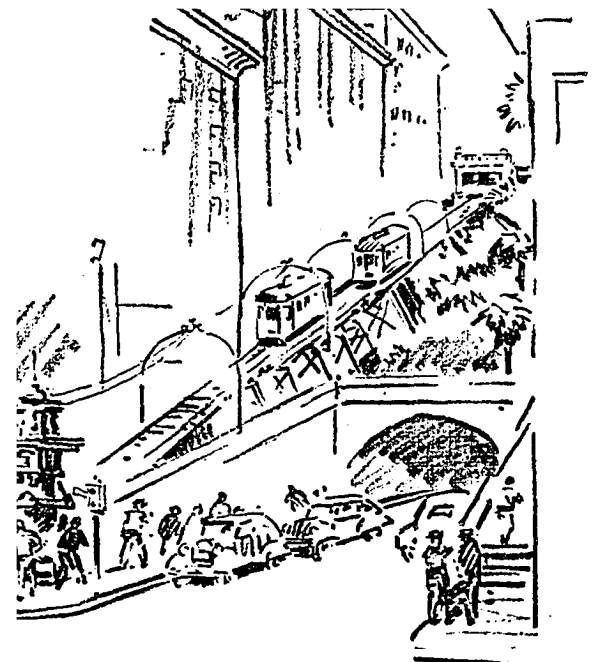
"This is the place," I used to gasp, "I shall never leave here."

I never did very much work in those days, never finished more than a short

# Goodbye, Bunker Hill

It's the poetic story of a Los Angeles hill, a hill with a soul. You'll understand why when you read it

BY JOHN FANTE  
Illustrated by Harold Peterson



THEN MIDNIGHT AND THE SLOW PULL UP THE STAIRS OF ANGELS' FLIGHT—

fast. Oranges for lunch. Bananas for dinner. I used to sit with my feet out the window, watching the city's lights bursting in the green twilight, my lap piled with banana skins and orange peels. But I liked it, waiting for the darkness, waiting for the night and a prow through the dismal effulgence of Main St. and lower Fifth St. Down the eternal stairs of Angel's Flight to Hill St. and the blazing inferno below. Down to the Plaza. Down to Chinatown and Olvera St. Down to the jungled bitterness of lower Fifth St., drinking it down, gulping it down, the wild, beautiful, terrible city. Then midnight and the slow pull up the steep stairs of Angel's Flight, counting the stairs just for the fun of it, always getting mixed up after a hundred, happy to reach my hotel, grateful for the hard bed in my little room, its sheets so worn and thin you saw the striped mattress beneath. And there to lie and watch the neon lights jumping red and blue across the foot of the bed, my head whirling with a jumble of panting sensations. Gala days, those. Old Bunker Hill, I loved you then!

Strange people in that hotel. Strangers from Ohio, from New York, from Indiana. Suspicious folk, lonely folk, hating their suspicion, eager to quench

their loneliness, but afraid, afraid. Of what? They didn't know. They had been warned: Los Angeles, bad, be very careful of strangers.

I used to sit on the porch and watch them in the evenings as they returned from the roaring city below. Their eyes were startled, their mouths open, their breaths coming hard after the steep climb. Gratefully they threw themselves into porch rockers and gazed in confusion at the mysterious sky. The quiet hill relaxed them, the swishing, grease-stained palms told them they had returned to their earth again, back from the crazy whirl below. Their limbs sang with gratitude for Bunker Hill, the softness of children filled their harried eyes.

I knew a few of them. Mr. H. lived next door. "H.," retired from the Army with a meager pension, had scarcely enough money to pay his liquor bills. Often poor H. had to abstain from gin three and four days a month. He was so miserable there in his room, always naked under a gray bathrobe that showed hair and bones beneath, stumbling barefoot through a litter of empty gin bottles, forced to survive on cheap wine until the next check arrived. At night I could hear him in bed, tossing

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"THEY ARE CHANGING BUNKER HILL—BUT IN MY HEART THE PALMS STILL SIGH. THE GRASS IS FOREVER GREEN AND A BOY'S KITE LIES HELPLESS IN THE BRANCHES OF A BRAVE EUCALYPTUS TREE"

"SUCH DREAMS FOR A MAN! I USED TO SIT IN MY LITTLE ROOM WITH ITS WORN GREEN CARPET, SIT THERE IN THE HIGH OLD-FASHIONED ROCKER FEASTING MY EYES ON THE INCREDIBLE CITY BELOW"

story. It held me, that mysterious little room with its startling view, that lonely Bunker Hill with its ancient buildings, its quiet streets and lonely trees with here and there a bright spot from which came the scent of singing hamburgers, the crooning voice of Bing Crosby, the soft sound of men speaking and laughing.

I remember the cool afternoons, the city below, a film of carbon monoxide choking it, the deep moaning of traffic within the Third St. tunnel, the high frightened squeal of the cable car lurching up Angels' Flight.

I was higher than the City Hall, higher than the Biltmore, higher than the Richfield Tower. It was paradise. I couldn't work. I was drugged in dreams, steeped in the fascination of old houses and gentle eucalyptus trees growing out of the green slopes there on the west side of Bunker Hill. Sometimes I went down to the library and got a book, some poetry maybe, some gentle and persuasive book, something to read on the hillside, something to put me to sleep under the eucalyptus trees.

Tetsu Hagamoro, what has happened to him? He isn't there now, but in 1932 that wonderful Tetsu had a grocery store at Third and Flower. He used to see me coming, his black eyes laughing as he reached for a big paper sack. Lean days for me: sometimes only a nickel a day for food. The old man understood, nodding his head: in Tokyo he had an uncle who was a writer, too. Tough town, Tokyo. Tough for writers. So. Chasso. Verrie, verrie tough. Chasso. And Tetsu's bullet-shaped head bent over the fruit stall: always the same five-pound sack, Tetsu filling it with apples, oranges and bananas. Sometimes I had a dime, sometimes 15 cents. No matter to Tetsu, he always filled the sack. Once he saw me circle his little store on the other side of the street. Not even a nickel that day. Tetsu called me. "Chasso," said Tetsu. "Uncle in Tokyo. Him stahve, too. No gottem nickel. So. Chasso. Takem fruit. So. Takem. Pay rater. So. Thank you so much."

And the day was saved.

Fruit, fruit, fruit. Apples for break-



# GOODBYE, BUNKER HILL

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and groaning, smoking cigarettes and scratching matches savagely against the wall, denouncing his life, the government, the earth, mankind and particularly the lousy wine which clucked in his throat like a hen.

On the other side was Mrs. C., a widow, tall, gaunt, ferocious, uncommunicative, not even a nod when you met her in the hall and said hello. She had come from Battle Creek, Mich., and she was the oldest guest in the hotel, having lived in the same room for 22 years.

Occasionally I saw the inside of Mrs. C.'s room, especially in the hot afternoons, when she opened the door for the cooling cross draft. It made you gasp.

To the very ceiling it was piled with boxes and trunks and old newspapers. What one saw of the walls was covered by fly-specked daguerreotypes in heavy gold frames, pictures of men and women long dead, their grim faces defying complete obliteration.

MRS. C.'s key box was beside mine behind the clerk's desk. In all the months I lived there I never saw Mrs. C. get a letter. But every afternoon her mail box contained a new piece of mail: The Battle Creek News. Half of her room was piled to the ceiling with back numbers.

And there was the lad named Cross, who washed dishes at Bernstein's, and dreamed of the day when there would be money enough to return to Sydney, Australia. He had to have a stake. He had to return home with the appearances of a rich young man. It was his plan for vindication, for he had run away from home three years before and had got himself into serious trouble with his folks, writing them that he was a big executive in the lumber business.

And Julio, the Filipino, a bellhop at the Biltmore who wrote novels in his spare time, wrote novels with the facility of a boy scrawling his name on a back fence; Julio, the pest, who wrote a couple of novels a month and brought them to me for criticism. And Elaine, the shady, lovely Elaine, who arrived quietly at night and for two weeks had the hotel humming like a beehive with gossip; Elaine, who did a grand business around there, until the landlady found out and ordered her to leave.

AND Leon from San Francisco, always shouting in the lobby, denouncing Los Angeles endlessly, praising San Francisco with such fury no one dared dispute him. And Miss L., always draped in black, her small, white lips perpetually smiling, so that the smile gradually became somewhat sinister: Miss L., always scurrying to the library and returning with an armload of theosophic books. Miss L. was a student of palmistry and card reading. She claimed a great knowledge of dogs and pets, but one day the landlady's wirehaired terrier came down with distemper and Miss L. went screaming down the halls, shouting, "Run for your lives! Run for your lives!" She believed distemper brought influenza and tuberculosis to humans, and they had a hard time quieting her. She locked herself in her room and sprinkled the walls and carpets with lysol. For weeks we held our noses as we passed her door.

The dream of Miss L.'s life was to set up a little parlor where, for small sums, she could read palms, coffee cups, tea leaves and head bumps. The loafers in the lobby had some curious interpretations of Miss L.'s strange machinations, but they are unprintable.

But they are gone now, these people, scattered like dust. Everything changes, and for better or worse the change came for me, and the years have trickled

away, and Bunker Hill is only a memory. But it lives on. It gave my thought food and drink, it sated my hunger for life, despite the harsh rigors of straight fruit diet during those heroic months.

Everything changes, and now Bunker Hill faces change. It seemed timeless,

and now they are putting it away. The papers carry the story: the old Bunker Hill must go. The old hotels, the brave palms, the quiet streets—away with all of them! They are going to tear Bunker Hill down, or build it up, or wipe it out, or something. It hurts me. I wet my lips and inhale my cigarette and

smile. Those precious months! Those tender nights! How shall I mark them? Where shall I go to find their souvenirs?

They are changing Bunker Hill, yes, but in my heart the palms still sigh, the little plots of grass on the slopes remain forever green, and a boy's kite lies helplessly entangled in the branches of a brave eucalyptus tree.